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SUBJECT: ERITREA: COMMENTS ON ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

CLASSIFIED BY: POLITICAL OFFICER JOEY R. HOOD. REASONS: 1.4
(B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) POLOFF MET IN EARLY FEBRUARY WITH MUHYADIN SHENGEB, HEAD OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF ERITREAN YOUTH AND STUDENTS (NUEYS) TO DISCUSS SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND RELIGIOUS ISSUES AFFECTING ERITREAN YOUTH. SHENGEB SAID THAT, ALTHOUGH CHRISTIAN/MUSLIM RELATIONS ARE "CORRECT" IN ERITREA, THERE ARE EXTREMIST ERITREAN MUSLIMS WHO WOULD LIKE TO UPSET THAT BALANCE. ACCORDING TO SHENGEB, THESE ERITREAN MUSLIMS COME PRIMARILY FROM SUDAN, WHERE THEY HAVE LIVED FOR 10-20 YEARS AS REFUGEES, BUT WHO, THROUGH WAHHABI INDOCTRINATION, HAVE BECOME EXTREMIST IN THEIR VIEWS. SHENGEB ATTRIBUTED RECENT BOMBING INCIDENTS IN TESSENEI AND BARENTU TO THESE GROUPS. POLOFF ASKED IF THESE EXTREMISTS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RECENT GRENADE ATTACK ON A WEDDING PARTY IN KEREN, AND SHENGEB SAID YES, ALTHOUGH HE NOTED THAT THE ATTACK TOOK PLACE IN HAGAZ, APPROXIMATELY 30 KILOMETERS TO THE SOUTHWEST OF KEREN (SEE DAO ASMARA REPORTING FOR DETAILS ON THE INCREASE IN BOMBINGS). ASKED HOW EXTREMISTS COULD TRAVEL SO DEEPLY INTO ERITREAN TERRITORY AND CARRY OUT SUCH ATTACKS, SHENGEB CONCEDED THAT "THERE CERTAINLY ARE ERITREAN MUSLIMS WHO ARE SYMPATHETIC WITH THESE PEOPLE AND GIVE THEM SHELTER, AND THESE ARE THE ONES WHO CONCERN US."

¶2. (C) POLOFF ASKED WHAT ROLE, IF ANY, LIBYANS PLAYED IN THE LIVES OF ERITREANS MUSLIMS. SHENGEB RESPONDED THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF THE STATE OF ERITREA'S (GSE) INFORMATION WAS NOT COMPLETE IN THIS REGARD, BUT THAT HE BELIEVED LIBYANS PLAYED LITTLE OR NO ROLE IN ERITREAN ISLAMIC LIFE. THE LIBYAN GOVERNMENT AND THE WAHHABIS HAVE BEEN AT ODDS IN THE PAST, HE NOTED, BUT THEIR DIFFERENCES DO NOT SEEM TO HAVE GAINED MUCH TRACTION WITHIN ERITREA. "THE LIBYANS COME IN HERE, AS THEY DO IN OTHER PARTS OF AFRICA, AND PROMISE A LOT, MAKE A BIG SHOW, AND THEN DO NOTHING," SHENGEB OBSERVED. HE SAID THAT LIBYAN LEADER MU'AMMAR AL-QADDHAFI WANTED TO FORM AN ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATES OF LIBYAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN ERITREA, WHICH HAS BEEN DONE ACCORDING TO SHENGEB, BUT THIS GROUP HAS NOT AMOUNTED TO MUCH IN HIS VIEW. THE LIBYAN GOVERNMENT ALSO REQUESTED TO BUILD A CULTURAL CENTER SEVERAL YEARS AGO, BUT "MY GOVERNMENT HAS NOT GIVEN ITS AUTHORIZATION," SHENGEB SAID WITH A SMILE.

¶3. (C) BIOGRAPHIC NOTE: SHENGEB HAS BEEN HEAD OF THE NUEYS SINCE BEFORE 1991 AND IS A MUSLIM ORIGINATING IN THE EASTERN LOWLANDS. NUEYS IS A GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION THAT IS ACTIVE IN HIV/AIDS PREVENTION AND, ACCORDING TO ITS WEBSITE, "SEES TO IT THAT ANY NATIONALIST YOUTH INITIATIVE AIMED AT UPLIFTING YOUTH'S ROLE IN THE SOCIETY IS MATERIALIZED." MORE IMPORTANTLY, PERHAPS, SHENGEB IS ALSO AN EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBER OF THE RULING PARTY, THE PEOPLE'S FRONT FOR DEMOCRACY

AND JUSTICE (PFDJ). HE CLAIMS TO BE 34 YEARS OLD AND WAS A FULL-TIME ACTIVIST IN MASS ORGANIZATIONS IN EUROPE AND THE MIDDLE EAST DURING THE INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE. HE IS CHARACTERIZED BY LONGTIME EMBASSY CONTACTS AS MODERATE, PRAGMATIC, AND A NATIONALIST.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: SHENGEB'S COMMENTS, WHILE REFLECTING THE PFDJ'S OFFICIAL LINE, ARE MORE NUANCED THAN WHAT WE SOMETIMES HEAR FROM GSE OFFICIALS. MANY OFFICIALS WILL NOT ADMIT THAT THERE ARE ERITREAN MUSLIMS WHO SYMPATHIZE WITH, EVEN IF THEY DO NOT FULLY SUPPORT, EXTREMIST ERITREANS WHO ARE TRYING TO DISCREDIT THE GSE. AS RECENTLY AS JANUARY 24, TWO HIGH-LEVEL PFDJ MEMBERS TOLD A VISITING ACP-EU DELEGATION THAT "THERE IS NO POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN ERITREA, ONLY OUTSIDE FORCES TRYING TO DESTABILIZE THE GOVERNMENT" (REF B). SHENGEB'S CANDID VIEWS ARE PROBABLY A MORE ACCURATE REFLECTION OF THE GSE'S REALIZATION THAT THERE IS A DANGER THAT RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM COULD GAIN A FOOTHOLD AMONG ORDINARY ERITREANS AND THAT THIS MUST BE COUNTERED.

¶5. (U) KHARTOUM MINIMIZE CONSIDERED.

KATZ